

WHY FOOTNOTES MATTER:

CHECKING *ARMING AMERICA'S CLAIMS**

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The Importance of Footnotes: Checking *Arming America's* Claims

The 2001 winner of the Bancroft Prize for History was Michael A. Bellesiles's *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 2000). *Arming America* presents a startling reinterpretation of the role of guns in early America, one that demolishes many long-cherished myths about violence, guns, and hunting. Bellesiles argues that guns were very scarce in America before about 1840; handguns even more rare before 1848; and that few Americans hunted. Furthermore, Bellesiles claims that white-on-white violence was quite scarce throughout America in this period, with the strong implication that gun scarcity played a role in this.

Why were guns scarce? Because not only were guns expensive, but also because, "the majority of American men did not care about guns. They were indifferent to owning guns, and they had no apparent interest in learning how to use them."¹ Bellesiles claims that marksmanship was extraordinarily poor, and large numbers of adult men had no idea how to load a gun, or how to fire one.

In Bellesiles's view, this lack of both interest and knowledge of guns was because of the fundamentally peaceful nature of early America² and that hunting was very rare here until the mid-1830s, when a small number of wealthy Americans chose to ape their upper class British counterparts.³

When Bellesiles first presented these ideas in a *Journal of American History* article in 1996, I was starting research on a related question: why did eight slave states take the lead in the development of concealed weapon regulation in the period 1813-1840? Bellesiles's claim that

¹ Michael A. Bellesiles, *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 295.

² Bellesiles, 314-15.

³ Bellesiles, 320-23.

guns had been rare in America until the Mexican War was certainly intriguing. It might explain why so many of these laws regulating the carrying of deadly weapons (including handguns) appear at a time that Bellesiles claims America was changing from a peaceful, gentle, almost unarmed nation, into a land of violent gun owning hunters. As I researched my topic, it became apparent that Bellesiles's America was not the America that I was examining.

The traditional view of early America, a place where guns and hunting (and at least in some regions, violence) were common, appeared repeatedly in the travel accounts, memoirs, diaries, and newspapers that I read. My initial assumption for this dramatic discrepancy was that Bellesiles's sources and mine reflected different regions of America, or perhaps that he had relied more on official sources and government documents than I did.

Another possible explanation for this discrepancy is that when historians interpret ambiguous documents, there can be many different conclusions honestly drawn. Under the best of conditions, there are assumptions that each of us brings to an historical problem, and these assumptions influence how to read sources that admit of multiple meanings.

This problem of differing assumptions is especially severe when the historical question impinges on political questions of relevance today, for historians do not look down on public policy questions like Zeus from Olympus; the historian is almost always at least as interested in these questions as any other citizen. One *should* expect an historian to have an opinion on political questions; why bother to study history, if not for its significance to the problems of today?

Having spent much of several years reading primary sources of the early Republic, the more I read of that part of Bellesiles's book, the more disturbed I became. I found many glaring discrepancies between his claims, and what his sources actually said. As I checked Bellesiles's sources for the colonial period, I found dozens more discrepancies. I found incorrect quotations—and consistently incorrect in a direction that supported Bellesiles's thesis—never the other direction. I found quotations so severely out of context that

Bellesiles's use of them had completely inverted the author's meaning. I found that Bellesiles's representations of unambiguous primary and secondary sources were often completely the reverse of what they actually said.

Bellesiles makes much of inventories or arms censuses taken by various governments to demonstrate that guns were scarce. These arms censuses would be very persuasive evidence that guns were rare in early America—if the sources Bellesiles cites said what Bellesiles says they say.

As part of his proof that guns were in short supply among the population of Colonial Massachusetts, Bellesiles writes:

In 1630 the Massachusetts Bay Company reported in their possession: "80 bastard musketts, with snaphances, 4 Foote in the barrill without rests, 6 long Fowlinge peeces...6 foote longe; 4 longe Fowlinge peeces... 5-1/2 foote longe; 10 Full musketts, 4 Foote barrill, with matchlocks and rests," one hundred swords, and "5 peeces of ordnance, long sence bowght and paid For." There were thus exactly one hundred firearms for use among seven towns with a population of about one thousand.⁴

The source cited for this claim is "Shurtleff, ed., *Records of Massachusetts Bay* 1:25-26." But *Records of Massachusetts Bay* 1:25-26 says something completely different. It is *not* a list of weapons in Massachusetts Bay in 1630. It is not even a list of guns owned by the Company in Massachusetts in 1630. It is a list of "Necessaries conseaued [conceived?] meete for o[u]r intended voiadge for New England to bee prepared forthwith": a list of arms to be sent over by the Company from England, only some of which were already owned by them. There is nothing on the pages Bellesiles cites that indicates that this is a list of *all* the guns in the colony. There is nothing that indicates this list includes privately owned guns in Massachusetts Bay, as Bellesiles implies when he says "one hundred firearms for... a population of about one thousand."

Even the year that Bellesiles gives is wrong. The dates on the pages that Bellesiles cites are February 26 and March 2 1628/9 (Old Style). The year 1630 does not appear. Of course, if Bellesiles had given the correct year, most historians would have immediately wondered

⁴ Bellesiles, 63.

how the Massachusetts Bay Company could have done an inventory of guns in the colony before the colony existed.⁵

Bellesiles makes a strong and clear-cut claim about colonial laws regulating gun ownership:

At the same time, legislators feared that gun-toting freemen might, under special circumstances, pose a threat to the very polity that they were supposed to defend. Colonial legislatures therefore strictly regulated the storage of firearms, with weapons kept in some central place, to be produced only in emergencies or on muster day, or loaned to individuals living in outlying areas. They were to remain the property of the government. The Duke of York's first laws for New York required that each town have a storehouse for arms and ammunition. Such legislation was on the books of colonies from New Hampshire to South Carolina.⁶

Yet examination of the statutes and other primary sources, including some of the statutes that Bellesiles cites, shows that many of the colonial governments *did* generally trust the free population with guns; that there was no requirement that guns be stored in central storehouses; that the militia was obligated to be armed with individually owned and possessed weapons; that guns were sold (not loaned) to unarmed militiamen; and that guns were not automatically “the property of the government.”⁷

Perhaps the most blatant of Bellesiles's errors in the paragraph above—because Bellesiles's cited pages directly contradict it—is the claim about the “The Duke of York's first laws... required that each town have a storehouse for arms and ammunition.” His cited source is *The Colonial Laws of New York from the Year 1664 to the Revolution* 1:49-50. The Duke of York's “Military Affaires” statute cited by Bellesiles did provide that “Every Town shall be provided of a Sufficient ware house and a Safe convenient place thereunto Adjoyning for

⁵ Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England* (Boston: William White, 1853), 1:25-26.

⁶ Bellesiles, 73.

⁷ William Brigham, ed., *The Compact with the Charter and Laws of the Colony of New Plymouth...* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1836), 31; Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England* (Boston: William White, 1853), 1:84, 190, 210, 5:48-49; J. Franklin Jameson, ed., *Johnson's Wonder-Working Providence: 1628-1651* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1959), 231; *Code of 1650, Being a Compilation of the Earliest Laws and Orders of the General Court of Connecticut* (Hartford, Conn.: Silas Andrus, 1822), 72-73; William Hand Browne, ed., *Archives of Maryland* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1892), 1:77; William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* (New York: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 1:127.

keeping Powder and Ammunition....” The warehouse was to contain publicly owned powder, bullets, and match, but not a word about any guns or other arms to be so stored, and nothing requiring privately owned arms (for militia duty or otherwise) to be stored there.

Also on the pages that Bellesiles cites (*Colonial Laws of New York* 1:49-50) is a direct contradiction of his claim that weapons were kept in central storehouses, and that the guns used for militia duty remained the property of the government: “Besides the Generall stock of each Town[,] Every Male within this government from Sixteen to Sixty years of age, or not freed by public Allowance, shall[,] if freeholders[,] at their own, if sons or Servants[,] at their Parents and Masters Charge and Cost, be furnished from time to time and so Continue well furnished with Arms and other Suitable Proviton hereafter mentioned: under the penalty of five Shillings for the least default therein[:] Namely a good Serviceable Gun, allowed Sufficient by his Military Officer to be kept in Constant fitness for present Service” along with all the other equipment required in the field.⁸

Bellesiles also claims that, immediately before the American Revolution, “Massachusetts conducted a very thorough census of arms, finding that there were 21,549 guns in the province of some 250,000 people,”⁹ leaving the reader with the impression that he is citing a census of all guns both publicly and privately owned. (The term “census of arms,” not used in any of the primary sources cited by Bellesiles, gives the misleading impression of something as comprehensive as the population censuses done in the Colonial and early Republic periods.) Bellesiles’s source is an inventory of “Warlike Stores in Massachusetts,

⁸ *The Colonial Laws of New York from the Year 1664 to the Revolution...* (Albany, New York: James B. Lyon, 1894), 1:49-50.

⁹ Bellesiles, 181. Two pages later, on p. 183, Bellesiles claims that “most of the guns” in America were from the 20,000 Brown Besses shipped to America by the British government during the French & Indian War. (Bellesiles is very clear that he means all guns in America, including privately owned guns.) The word “most” tells us that these 20,000 Brown Besses were a majority of the guns in America, and therefore there could not have been more than 40,000 guns in all of America—and more than half were in Massachusetts. Such careless and obvious inconsistencies are fairly common in *Arming America*.

From where Bellesiles drew this population figure of 250,000 is an excellent question. *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 755, reports a population of 349,094 (including 5,249 blacks) in 1776; the 1790 census shows 378,556, consistent with the *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.* figure, but not Bellesiles.

1774” contained in the *Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts*. But that inventory, dated April 14, 1775, is utterly silent about privately owned firearms. The only clear statement of which firearms were counted indicates that these were publicly owned arms in town stores. Not a word indicates that this count of “Warlike Stores” was a comprehensive list of all guns in Massachusetts.¹⁰

A detailed examination of the *Journals*, in the hopes of finding some page that Bellesiles failed to cite that *would* support his claim, only further demonstrated that Bellesiles’s claim is unsupported. One order on February 13, 1775 directed a committee to inquire “into the state of the militia, their numbers and equipments, and recommending to the selectmen of the several towns and districts in this province, to make return of their town and district stocks of ammunition and warlike stores to this Congress.”¹¹

The following day, the resolve is made more explicit: that the inquiry is concerning “the state of the militia” and directs that “an exact state of the their numbers and equipments” be taken. This *might* be interpreted as including privately owned guns owned by militiamen, but that would be an inference, not the certain fact that Bellesiles presents. Even if this count included privately owned militia guns, this would not be a comprehensive census of arms of the entire Massachusetts population, since not all adults (and not even all adult males) were members of the militia.¹²

Another order on March 22, 1775, directed a committee “to receive the returns of the several officers of militia, of their numbers and equipage, and the returns from the several towns of their town stock of ammunition.”¹³ This seems to confirm that only military

¹⁰ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, *The Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts in 1774 and 1775* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838) (hereinafter cited as *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*), 756.

¹¹ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 98.

¹² *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 99. *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 348-49, order non-militia members living on the sea coasts or within twenty miles “that they carry their arms and ammunition with them to meeting on the [S]abbath, and other days when they meet for public worship.”

¹³ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 109.

weapons and ammunition possessed by enrolled militia members and publicly owned weapons were counted.

Other evidence from the *Journals* suggests that firearms were plentiful, and that the “arms census” recorded only a part of all firearms in the province. An entry for October 27, 1774 directs inhabitants of Massachusetts to be “properly and effectually armed and equipped” and that “if any of the inhabitants are not provided with arms and ammunition according to law” the town was to arm them.¹⁴ These resolutions are repeated at later times in similar form, sometimes limited to militiamen and Minutemen,¹⁵ other times addressed to all the “inhabitants of this colony....”¹⁶ If guns were really in such short supply, as Bellesiles claims, it seems a bit odd that the Provincial Congress was ordering every militia member to be armed, and the towns to provide arms to those who didn’t have them. Why issue an order that was, according to Bellesiles, utterly impossible to achieve?

Other pages in the Provincial Congress’s journals show quite clearly that firearms were *not* scarce. A committee appointed to examine the problem of soldiers who lacked firearms reported on May 9, 1775:

Whereas, *a few* of the inhabitants of this colony, who are enlisted into its service, are destitute of fire arms, bayonets, and other accoutrements;

Resolved, That the selectmen of the several towns and districts in this colony be, and hereby are, directed and empowered to examine into the state of the equipment of such inhabitants of their respective towns and districts as are, or may be, enlisted into the service of this colony, and where any are deficient in arms or accoutrements, as aforesaid, it is recommended to the selectmen to supply them out of the town stock, and *in case of a deficiency there, to apply to such inhabitants of their respective towns and districts as, in their opinions, can best spare their arms or accoutrements*, and to borrow or purchase the same for the use of said inhabitants so enlisted: and the selectmen are also directed to take a bill from such persons as shall sell their arms and accoutrements, in the name of this colony....¹⁷ [emphasis added]

Not “most of the inhabitants of this colony, who are enlisted into its service” are without “fire arms, bayonets, and other accoutrements”; not “many”; not “some” but “a few”—and it

¹⁴ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 34.

¹⁵ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 48, 71.

¹⁶ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 103.

¹⁷ *J.Mass.Prov.Cong.*, 209-10.

isn't clear whether the problem is firearms, bayonets, or "accoutrements" (for example, cartridge pouches). Furthermore, there were apparently enough others who were not members of the militia who could "spare their arms or accoutrements" that this was considered a realistic source of "fire arms, bayonets, and other accoutrements...." Perhaps the committee was deluded about how scarce guns were in their time and place.

Bellesiles attempts to prove that guns were in very short supply in the early Republic again through the use of "arms censuses," which Bellesiles purports included not only publicly owned arms, but also all privately owned arms. Bellesiles tells us that in 1803, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn conducted "a careful census of firearms in America, with the intention of demonstrating that the America militia owned sufficient firearms." After reporting that there were 235,831 guns, Bellesiles claims that, "Half of all these guns were in the hands of the federal government, with about one-quarter in state arsenals. The remainder were privately owned."¹⁸

But when you examine the sources that Bellesiles cites for this statement, there is nothing to support his claim that this "Return of the Militia" included all privately owned guns. The circular letter from Secretary of War Dearborn to the state and territorial governors is explicit, asking them to provide information "stating the military strength of each State, the actual situation of the arms, accoutrements, and ammunition of the several corps, with the same, and every other thing which may relate to their government, and the general advantage of good order and military discipline."¹⁹ There is no division contained in the "Return of the Militia" tables that distinguish between those "in the hands of the federal government" and those in state arsenals. There is nothing in the militia return that indicates how many of the arms were privately owned. There is nothing that indicates how many arms there were in the United States, other than those in the hands of the militia. There is nothing to indicate a

¹⁸ Bellesiles, 241.

¹⁹ United States Congress, *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:159.

comprehensive door-to-door questioning of the population, as the term “census” would suggest.

Indeed, it seems unlikely that any arms “in the hands of the federal government” would be listed in a “Return of the Militia,” based on the language of the circular letter. The 1810 and 1811 Returns of the Militia²⁰ are quite similar in form and method to the 1803 Return of the Militia. The 1811 inventory of federal military stores,²¹ which clearly is not included in the totals contained in the 1810 or 1811 militia returns, strongly implies that a “Return of the Militia” included no federal arms at all. Nor is there anything in the 1803, 1810, or 1811 “Return of the Militia” supporting circular letters, or explanatory notes that identifies or even suggests how many of the arms so listed are privately owned, or that these returns included all privately owned guns.²²

Another interesting point is that the firearms listed in these returns are “pairs of pistols,” muskets, and rifles. From the categories, it would seem that this census was only of military arms, and could not have included all privately owned guns (such as fowling pieces), many of which would have been inappropriate for militia use.

Bellesiles also claims that in 1806 “a congressional committee estimated that there were 250,000 guns in America.”²³ It is clear from his statement on page 241 of *Arming America* listing “235,831” guns in America in 1803 that Bellesiles means that the committee’s estimate included all guns in America, both publicly and privately owned.

The 1806 congressional committee report that Bellesiles cites, however, is quite explicit about what guns were included in this estimate. After explaining that the laws of the United

²⁰ *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:258-62, 297-301.

²¹ *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:303-4.

²² *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:160-62, 258-62, 297-301. Had Bellesiles turned even three more pages (*American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:165, 168-72), he would have found somewhat larger numbers of firearms in a “Return of the Militia” compiled less than two months later, after New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, North Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky sent in their returns. This increases the number of firearms a bit, but does nothing to support Bellesiles’s claim that these are comprehensive censuses of firearms in the United States, or that they list all privately owned firearms.

²³ Bellesiles, 241 n. 123.

States required every “citizen enrolled in the militia” to “provide himself with a good musket or rifle,” the report explains, “From the best estimates which the committee has been able to form, there is upwards of 250,000 fire arms and rifles in the hands of the militia, which have, a few instances excepted, been provided by, and are the property of, the individuals who hold them.”²⁴ This is explicitly a statement that there were *at least* 250,000 guns in the hands of the militia alone, nearly all of them were privately owned. Bellesiles’s claim that only about one quarter of the 235,831 guns in America three years earlier were privately owned lacks credibility; somehow, the number of privately owned guns went from almost 59,000 (one-quarter of 235,831) to “upwards of 250,000” in three years. At a minimum, Bellesiles should have explained this dramatic change, and at least raised the possibility that he had misread the 1803 “arms census.”

The following paragraph of the 1806 report, on the same page (where Bellesiles should not have missed it) gives a count of the number of guns in the federal magazines: 132,000, of which 120,000 were “fit for use” and 12,000 “which need repairs.” To figure out how many guns there were in the United States, one would need to add the “upwards of 250,000” that were privately owned militia guns to the 132,000 guns in the federal magazines. The guns in the state magazines would also have to be added—and the report is explicit that these were not counted. If there were a count of guns in the hands of non-militia members (which there is not in this report), this would also need to be added.

Depending on how one interprets the congressional committee report, it is possible that there were also large numbers of firearms owned by militia members that were not considered to be military weapons, and thus not included in this estimate of “upwards of 250,000 fire arms and rifles....” Bellesiles’s representation of the 1803 militia return, and the 1806 congressional committee report, are utterly wrong; indeed, one is hard pressed to see how anyone could read that report, and describe it the way that Bellesiles does.

²⁴ *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 1:198.

Bellesiles discusses the Militia Act of 1792, and how it obligated every able-bodied free white male between 18 and 45 to enroll in the militia:

Further, “every citizen so enrolled, shall...be constantly provided with a good musket or firelock, a sufficient bayonet and belt, two spare flints,” and other accoutrements. Congress took upon itself the responsibility of providing those guns, and specified that within five years all muskets “shall be of bores sufficient for balls of the eighteenth part of a pound.”²⁵

But Bellesiles’s quote from the Militia Act of 1792 is incorrect. It is not just that Bellesiles leaves out important words—he adds to it, and changes its meaning. The actual text is:

That every citizen so enrolled *and notified, shall within six months thereafter, provide himself* with a good musket or firelock, a sufficient bayonet and belt, two spare flints, and a knapsack, a pouch with a box therein to contain not less than twenty-four cartridges, suited to the bore of his musket or firelock: or with a good rifle, knapsack, shot-pouch and powder-horn, twenty balls suited to the bore of his rifle, and a quarter of a pound of powder....²⁶ [missing text emphasized]

Not only does Bellesiles leave out the words “provide himself” that demonstrate that Congress did *not* take “upon itself the responsibility of providing those guns,” but his misquotation of the Militia Act of 1792 includes the words “constantly provided,” which hides the change in the tense of the verb “shall.”

When confronted with this very dramatic error, Bellesiles first denied that there was any error at all, insisting that I had read an early version of the bill, and didn’t understand the difference between a bill (which is still subject to amendment) and a statute passed by Congress. Eventually, as the weight of evidence accumulated, he admitted that the text was incorrect, and explained his error as:

It took me a while to find my original source at a library in South Carolina, but the phrase “shall...be constantly provided with” is in the 1792 militia act. But you are right that it is not in any version I could find from the 1790s. So I then went carefully through the legislative

²⁵ Bellesiles, 230.

²⁶ *Statutes at Large*, 2nd Cong., sess. 1, Ch. 33 (1792), 1:271-74. Bellesiles gives a number of citations for his version of the statute: “*Militia Laws*, 8-10, 13; *U.S. Statutes* 1:271-74 (reenacted 2 February 1813, 2:797); *Debates and Proceedings in the Congress* 3:1392-95; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 128-35.” Unfortunately, since *Arming America* lacks a bibliography, attempting to locate the full citation of *Militia Laws* was difficult. In any case, since Bellesiles is quoting a federal statute, and he cites *U.S. Statutes* and *Debates and Proceedings in the Congress*, he is asserting that these were his sources. Both *U.S. Statutes* and *Debates and Proceedings in the Congress* are in agreement about the text, though not in agreement with Bellesiles.

records and found an 1803 Amendment to the 1792 Act (“An Act in addition to an Act entitled ‘An Act More effectually to provide for the National Defence.’”) Checking further, I found it as US Statutes II: 207, passed March 2, 1803.

So I was at fault in not reconciling the 1815 version I used with the 1792 version I also read (I assumed that they were just different versions of the same act).²⁷

In spite of explicitly listing his source for the quotation as *US Statutes* 1:271-74 and *Debates and Proceedings in the Congress* 3:1392-95, he actually quoted a later document that Bellesiles says contained the 1803 Militia Act.

There is an 1803 Militia Act that says, “That every citizen duly enrolled in the militia, shall be constantly provided with arms, accoutrements, and ammunition...”²⁸ But this doesn’t match Bellesiles’s “quote” either. It does have “constantly provided”, but the rest of the sentence is different. Even ignoring this, Bellesiles didn’t cite the 1803 Militia Act; and even that statute doesn’t specify that *Congress* is to supply the arms; it leaves it a bit open as to who is obligated to keep the militiamen “constantly provided.” Indeed, at least one state prosecution of a militiaman for failure to “be constantly provided” under the 1803 Militia Act is very clear on two points: the 1803 Militia Act was in addition to (not in place of) the 1792 Militia Act, and the individual militiaman was still obligated to provide *himself* with these arms and accoutrements.²⁹

Even worse, Bellesiles’s misquotation of the Militia Act of 1792 is specific to establishing that the militia was woefully short of guns in the 1790s. Even if Bellesiles’s misquotation was from the 1803 Militia Act (which it is not), the paragraphs that follow it are now logically incorrect, seeking to explain Congressional actions of 1792 and 1794 based on a law written ten years later.

In this same paragraph, but not dependent on his misquotation of the Militia Act of 1792, Bellesiles makes some claims about the inability of private American gun manufacturers to build arms for government contracts. What is again interesting is how Bellesiles’s sources

²⁷ Michael A. Bellesiles to Professor Eugene Volokh, November 10, 2000, distributed on firearmsconlawprof@listserv.ucla.edu, November 13, 2000.

²⁸ *Statutes at Large*, 7th Cong., sess. 2, Ch. 15 (1803), 2:207.

²⁹ *Commonwealth v. Stephen Annis*, 9 Mass. 31 (1812).

differ from Bellesiles's representation of them. After reporting that Congress decided in 1792 to supply all the arms of the militia (based on his misquotation of the Militia Act of 1792), "Congress ordered the purchase of seven thousand muskets. Over the next two years, the government was able to purchase only 480 'rifle guns.'" Bellesiles clearly intends the reader to believe that these purchases were in 1792, discussing them in the same paragraph as his misquoted Militia Act of 1792, and before a paragraph that discusses actions taken by Secretary of War Knox in 1793.³⁰

M. L. Brown gives a very different description of the 1792 contract:

In 1792 Congress, further alarmed by increasing British and Spanish activity along the vast frontier, raised a battalion of riflemen consisting of four companies each comprised of 82 privates which were to be armed with the American rifle....

The contract rifles...were purchased from Pennsylvania riflesmiths between September 12, 1792, and May 5, 1793, at an average cost of \$10.00 per stand....³¹

A total of 436 rifles were produced and delivered in less than nine months³² to arm 328 soldiers. The limitation was not that private industry could not supply enough rifles, as Bellesiles's use of "only" seems to imply, but that the government was only buying enough rifles for four companies of riflemen.

Concerning the 7,000 muskets that Bellesiles represents as being ordered by Congress at the same time as the rifles, in 1792, another historian, Felicia Johnson Deyrup, cites the same source as Bellesiles (Hicks's *Notes on United States Ordnance* 1:14), but reports that the order was in 1794, and that the government also successfully bought 2,000 rifles that year.³³ Examination of Bellesiles and Deyrup's common source, Hicks, shows that, once again, Bellesiles has misread his source.

³⁰ Bellesiles, 230.

³¹ M.L. Brown, *Firearms in Colonial America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980), 361-62.

³² Brown, 362.

³³ Felicia Johnson Deyrup, *Arms Makers of the Connecticut Valley: A Regional Study of the Economic Development of the Small Arms Industry, 1798-1870* (Menasha, Wisc.: George Banta Publishing Co., 1948), 42-43.

The 7,000 muskets were ordered in 1794, not in 1792. According to Hicks, the 7,000 muskets were ordered from abroad, “[t]here not being any source of domestic supply of muskets at that time.” Rifles were available from domestic manufacturers, and they continued to meet the relatively low volume demand for rifles for the Army and for supply to friendly Indians until 1810.³⁴

While Bellesiles describes Congress as ordering 7,000 muskets from Britain, and suggests that 480 rifles delivered by American makers represented some sort of failure to make guns quickly, Bellesiles buried in the endnote that it was five years before the muskets ordered from Britain were delivered. After a scathing (and inaccurate) criticism of the slowness of the American rifle makers in the main body of his text, it seems a bit misleading to hide in the endnote the even greater slowness of the British musket makers to deliver.³⁵

Bellesiles also writes a ferocious critique of how the fledgling American gun industry was unable to build guns for federal contracts in the early Republic. One might picture, after reading his account, the Three Stooges in waistcoats, failing to make guns because: “It never seemed to occur to any contemporary that gun manufacturing should be left to the vagaries of the free market, perhaps because they all knew that the public was not sufficiently interested in guns.”³⁶

Bellesiles criticizes the American firms that contracted to make muskets in 1798 as evidence that there was no real knowledge of how to make guns in the United States:

The government’s continuing financial support of private gunmakers flew in the face of results. Just under 1000 had been delivered by September 30, 1800, the date on which the government was supposed to have received the forty thousand muskets commissioned from

³⁴ James E. Hicks, *Notes on United States Ordnance* (Mount Vernon, N.Y.: James E. Hicks, 1940), 1:14. See *Statutes at Large*, 3rd Cong., Sess. 1, ch. 14, 1:352 for the text of the statute that authorized the purchase—though without specifying either domestic or foreign sourcing for the weapons. Hicks, 1:30, lists contracts, largely with the Lancaster County rifle makers, for rifles, pistols, and a few muskets in 1807 and 1808. Daniel D. Hartzler, *Arms Makers of Maryland* (George Shumway: York, Penn. 1977), 207-8, gives examples of the federal government contracting with small gunsmiths for rifles intended for distribution to friendly Indians as late as 1811.

³⁵ See Hicks, 1:14-15, pages cited by Bellesiles, for details on the slow deliveries.

³⁶ Bellesiles, 235.

twenty-seven gunmakers.³⁷

Bellesiles's endnote cites Hicks, *Notes on U.S. Ordnance*, 1:42-43, and nothing else as his source for this claim. *Nothing* at Hicks, 1:42-43 relates to the 1798 contracts—it's all 1812 contracts and later. There is a discussion of the 1798 contracts at Hicks, 1:19-23, but the only table that shows delivery counts reports that 2,646 muskets had been received as of September 26, 1801—not 1800—and this appears to be a count only of muskets received by one set of government inspectors,³⁸ since Gluckman reports that guns actually delivered by contractors through June 10, 1801 totaled 14,032.³⁹

Nor, contrary to Bellesiles's claim, is there anything in Hicks that indicates that all the muskets were to be delivered by September 30, 1800. The only contract date in Hicks's discussion is a copy of the contract between the partnership of Nicholas White, Thomas Crabb, Jacob Mitzger, and Christopher Barnhizle of Frederick Town, Maryland—and that specifies that all of the muskets were to be delivered no later than March of 1800.⁴⁰

Bellesiles's exercise in incorrect citation continues: "Many gun factories turned out to be flash-in-the-pan operations, taking advantage of government contracts and then vanishing."⁴¹ In the endnote, Bellesiles tells us, "For instance, twelve Massachusetts gunmakers failed to fulfill their government contracts: Silas Allen of Shrewsbury; Asher Bartlett, Henry Osborne, and Caswell & Dodge of Springfield; Thomas French, Adam Kinsley, and Rudolph & Charles S. Leonard of Canton; Rufus Perkins of Bridgewater; Alvin Pratt, Elijah and Asa Waters, and Luke Wood of Sutton; Lemuel Pomeroy of Pittsfield."⁴²

Bellesiles is still using the same source, Hicks, 1:42-43, and again, those aren't the right pages for that contract, the gunmakers Bellesiles lists aren't on those pages, and the correct pages for the 1798 contract say absolutely nothing about the failure of these contractors to

³⁷ Bellesiles, 237.

³⁸ Hicks, 1:19-23.

³⁹ Arcadi Gluckman, *United States Muskets, Rifles and Carbines* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Otto Ulbrich Co., 1948), 69.

⁴⁰ Hicks, 1:19-23.

⁴¹ Bellesiles, 237.

⁴² Bellesiles, 522-3 n. 111.

fulfill their contracts.⁴³ These names and failures to fulfill their contracts would be correct for the 1808 contract, discussed at Hicks, 1:32-33—but the dates are of course much different than Bellesiles says, and the statement about “under one thousand had been delivered” doesn’t fit any date in the table of musket deliveries for the 1808 contract.⁴⁴

Bellesiles goes on to tell us that Eli Whitney did not complete his contracted 10,000 muskets until “late in 1809, nine years behind schedule. The other twenty-six gunmakers produced just two thousand muskets—twenty-eight thousand (93 percent) short of their goal—only one of them fulfilling his contract with the government, and that five years late.”⁴⁵

Bellesiles has confused two different contracts, and two different sets of contractors. Whitney’s muskets for the 1798 contract were indeed delivered nine years late (in January, 1809, not “late in 1809”),⁴⁶ but the other 1798 contractors had delivered at least 13,234 muskets by January 1, 1803⁴⁷—not “just two thousand muskets” as Bellesiles claims. Furthermore, as detailed in Table 1 below, at least three of the contractors for 1798 had either completed or overfilled their contracts by January 1, 1803: Nathan and Henry Cobb (100%); Huntington, Livingston, Bellows, and Stone (122%); and Amos Stillman & Co. (105%). One other contractor was close: Allen, Grant, and Bernard delivered 93% of their contracted amount. Bellesiles’s source (whatever it was, since it clearly wasn’t the one Bellesiles cites) may have confused the deliveries by contractors under the 1808 contract with deliveries under the 1798 contract—which of course, was still in process when Whitney completed his late deliveries.

Worse than the confused citations, and the confusion of the 1798 and 1808 contract deliveries, is that Bellesiles’s characterization of these twelve musket makers as “flash-in-the-pan operations” makes them sound as if they were set up to get the 1798 contract, and then

⁴³ Hicks, 1:19-23, 42-43.

⁴⁴ Hicks, 1:32-33.

⁴⁵ Bellesiles, 237.

⁴⁶ Gluckman, 78.

⁴⁷ Gluckman, 69-81.

went bankrupt. Henry Osborne appears to have been in the gun making business at least until 1821.⁴⁸ Adam Kinsley delivered muskets for the 1798 contract;⁴⁹ Rufus Perkins was in business from 1799 through 1812;⁵⁰ Asa Waters had been a gun maker as early as 1776, and delivered muskets as part of the 1818 and 1823 contracts.⁵¹

Furthermore, the statement “failed to fulfill their government contracts” really means that they did not deliver the full number of muskets specified in the contracts—not that they failed to deliver guns. The characterization of “delivered just a few guns and then abandoned the business” is also misleading. The following table shows the number of guns contracted and the number delivered as of October 7, 1812, for the 1808 contract.⁵²

contractor	contracted	delivered	%
Joshua and Charles Barstow	2,500	1,625	65%
A. & P. Bartlett	2,500	1,500	60%
Oliver Bidwell	4,000	750	19%
I. I. & N. Brooke	4,000	1,257	31%
O. & E. Evans	4,000	1,960	49%
French, Blake & Kinsley	4,000	2,175	54%
Daniel Gilbert	5,000	875	18%
Goetz & Westphall	2,500	1,019	41%
W. & I. I. Henry	10,000	4,246	42%
Stephen Jenks & Sons	4,000	2,300	58%
R. & C. Leonard	5,000	2,125	43%
John Miles, Jr.	9,000	2,407	27%
Rufus Perkins	2,500	200	8%
W. & H. Shannon	4,000	1,001	25%
Ethan Stillman	2,500	825	33%
Waters & Whitmore	5,000	3,000	60%
Wheeler & Morrison	2,500	125	5%
Winner, Nippes & Co.	9,000	3,900	43%
Sweet, Jenks & Sons	3,000	250	8%
total	85,000	31,540	37%

Table 1: 1808 Musket Contract Deliveries

⁴⁸ Deyrup, 225.

⁴⁹ Hicks, 1:20 for contract; Gluckman, 75, for deliveries.

⁵⁰ Merrill Lindsay, *The New England Gun: The First Two Hundred Years* (New Haven, Conn.: New Haven Colony Historical Society, 1975), 92; Deyrup, 225.

⁵¹ Gluckman, 146; Deyrup, 226; Lindsay, 74, 77.

⁵² Gluckman, 104-116.

Only three of the contractors could with any accuracy be said to have “delivered just a few guns and then abandoned the business”: Rufus Perkins; Wheeler & Morrison; and Sweet, Jenks & Sons. Concerning Wheeler & Morrison, a more accurate statement is that Wheeler abandoned his partner Morrison by dying in 1809, and in that sense Wheeler & Morrison could be considered to have “abandoned the business.”

Sweet, Jenks & Sons is an interesting case because Jenks & Sons had a completely separate musket contract as well, and they certainly did not abandon *that* contract, fighting a continuing battle for compensation as late as 1820—and that battle is a reminder that the problems of making muskets was *not* a deficiency of gunmaking skills in America, as Bellesiles claims.

The firm of Jenks and Sons of Providence, Rhode Island, contracted in October of 1808 to make 4,000 Model 1808 muskets at the rate of 800 per year. In an era before blueprints and written specifications, the government supplied a pattern musket, which the contractor was supposed to disassemble and use for producing tooling, in much the same way in which paper dress patterns are used today.

The pattern musket supplied by the government to Jenks and Son was defective, and these defects were not discovered until well into the manufacturing process. When Jenks sought reimbursement for the substantial expenses involved in correcting these problems, the federal government refused. Though Jenks and Son made a number of poor decisions as well during the process, it clear that the primary reason that Jenks & Sons failed to complete their 1808 contract was not because Americans did not know how to make guns, but a series of management mistakes by both the government and the contractor.

Of Jenks and Sons 4,000 contracted muskets, at least 1,000 were delivered to the federal government, and were determined to be “of good quality” by the Superintendent of Springfield Armory. The muskets rejected by the federal government’s arms inspector were sold—at a higher price than the government paid—for export. It is not clear that all of these arms were actually defective; it would appear that many of Jenks & Sons rejected arms were

completely functional, but out of specification, unlike some of the other contractors in this period, who did not suffer from such picky government arms inspectors.⁵³

Hicks reproduces a letter from Callender Irvine, the Commissary General, to Secretary of War John Armstrong of April 5, 1813, in which Irvine explains some of the problems that the contractors were having in filling their contracts: “Those Contracts were founded on imperfect Muskets as Standards, and at prices for which it was impossible to have made good Muskets so that if the Contracts are complied with strictly by individuals, the Government will be saddled with so many defective Arms of which description there are enough already in store near this City....” Irvine then went on to blame his predecessor, Tench Coxe, for having made contracts that produced a large pile of guns only suited for scrap.⁵⁴ This is an important point, one that Bellesiles seems to have overlooked in his characterization of the government musket contractors. While a polemicist might have a reason to leave out such important details, a historian should not.

Bellesiles portrays the failure of the federal contractors to fulfill their contracts as indicative of a fundamental lack of knowledge of gun manufacturing in America, claiming that Eli Whitney “recognized the basic problem with large-scale arms production in the United States; there were not enough trained gunsmiths.”⁵⁵ But what Whitney was attempting to do was to create a division of labor that allowed interchangeable gun parts to be made by less skilled workers. As Bellesiles recognizes, Whitney never really made this idea work. What Bellesiles leaves out, however, is that Whitney’s problem was not a lack of trained gunsmiths, but an inability to develop the technology that allowed him to *not* hire trained gunsmiths.

A letter from Col. Decius Wadsworth of the Ordnance Office to Secretary of War John Armstrong, dated June 6, 1814, reproduced in Gluckman, gives a bit more detail about the

⁵³ William O. Achtermier, *Rhode Island Arms Makers & Gunsmiths: 1643-1883* (Providence, R.I.: Man at Arms, 1980), 21-24.

⁵⁴ Callender Irvine to John Armstrong, April 5, 1813, quoted in Gluckman, 36.

⁵⁵ Bellesiles, 233.

problems that confronted not only Whitney but the other contractors as well. It provides another explanation for why the government was so tolerant of late and incomplete deliveries, besides the one that Bellesiles suggests: a government that let the contractors take terrible advantage of it. Irvine's letter gives a very different picture than Bellesiles's description of Whitney's muskets as "dreadful", and also explains why some (but only some) contractors delivered just a few guns, or went bankrupt:⁵⁶

Most of the individuals of small property who engaged in these contracts were absolutely ruined thereby, and the difficulties were so much greater than had been apprehended, it proved in general losing business to the concerned. Mr. Whitney having never before engaged in such a business, and *not having workmen brought up to the trade, was under the necessity of executing various parts of the work adapted to the inexperience of his hands, and calculated to obviate the necessity of employing men alone who had been bred to the trade...*

It may not be amiss to state that I think *his arms æ good, if not superior, to those which have in general been made anywhere else in the United States, not excepting those which have been made at the public armories.*⁵⁷ [emphasis added]

Other manufacturers, while not trying to lead the technology as aggressively as Whitney, were attempting to transform a traditional, small-scale handicraft industry—gun making—into a large factory system. As one of one Bellesiles's sources, Felicia Johnson Deyrup's detailed study of the New England firearms industry, points out—but Bellesiles seems to have missed: "[C]ontractors were forced into division of labor and the invention of machine tools, which, though of incalculable benefit to the industry, delayed them in filling their contracts."⁵⁸

Bellesiles also portrays the failure of contract manufacturers as government largesse without any acknowledgment of the unusual circumstances under which the contract manufacturers operated, claiming that, "It never seemed to occur to any contemporary that gun manufacturing should be left to the vagaries of the free market..."⁵⁹ Everything about the government contracts, however, was an attempt to defeat a free market, as Deyrup, one of

⁵⁶ Bellesiles, 238.

⁵⁷ Gluckman, 80-81.

⁵⁸ Deyrup, 48.

⁵⁹ Bellesiles, 235.

Bellesiles's sources, makes very clear. Contractors were not allowed to use imported parts, because that would defeat the government's goal—creation of a large-scale factory system for making military weapons. The government was very selective to whom they gave arms contracts, excluding those who had gunsmithing experience, but not property. (The government's goal seems to have been to make recovery of damages for non-performance easier.) Government contractors were also prohibited from doing business with any other customers, leading to serious problems when a contract had been fulfilled, but a new one had not yet been granted,⁶⁰ though at least some contractors seem to have either violated this requirement, or were not contractually bound to do so.⁶¹

Perhaps the hardest problem to understand in an age when accountants calculate manufacturing costs to the hundredth of a penny is that cost accounting was still in its infancy. The contractors—and the government—were still learning how to compute overhead, depreciation of tools, and distinguishing investments in factories from investments in the land on which the factory was built. It appears that along with the surprises and delays associated with pioneering large-scale gun manufacturing in the United States, the government contractors in the period 1798-1830 were building muskets for an average cost of \$12.88. Yet from 1807 to 1810, the price the government paid contractors was \$10.75. Many of the early contractors lost money on every musket delivered—though they probably did not know it until too late—and that some went out of business is therefore no great surprise.

Even the government's own Springfield Armory, a model of success to Bellesiles, figured its production costs in the early years as high as \$16.48 per musket, and usually exceeding \$13.00 each.⁶² Springfield Armory's success in making guns was consistent with the \$300 hammer horror stories of the modern Department of Defense contractors. This explains also why, as Bellesiles smugly notes, a number of contractors asked to be let out of their federal

⁶⁰ Deyrup, 44-47.

⁶¹ Achtermier, 23.

⁶² Deyrup, 48-54.

contracts.⁶³ If contracts were money-losing propositions, the temptation to manufacture for the more lucrative private sector would have been very strong.

Virginia armed its militia through a combination of private contracts and a state gun factory, and *Arming America* describes Virginia's attempt to arm its militia with uniform weapons. As is usual with Bellesiles's work, there is a near-complete disconnect between what Bellesiles's source says, and what Bellesiles says that it says. The entire paragraph to be dissected below from page 236 of *Arming America* has a single footnote. The source Bellesiles lists is Giles Cromwell's marvelously detailed history of the Virginia Manufactory of Arms, pages 2-57:

The shortage of gunmakers in the early republic is clearly illustrated in the history of Virginia's effort to establish an armory. In 1797 Governor James Wood informed the legislature that his government had searched the state to find anyone who could make arms for the militia, without success.⁶⁴

Bellesiles's source for this claim, Cromwell's book, tells a somewhat different story:

At the junction of the Rivanna and Fluvanna Rivers, the Point of Fork Arsenal centered around the storing of munitions and repairing arms, and a small force of artificers was maintained there from 1781 to 1801. Furthermore, scattered throughout the mountain and valley regions were many individual rifle makers who advanced their skills by making exceptionally fine rifles.⁶⁵

Bellesiles describes how Governor Wood of Virginia sought to obtain more arms for the state militia:

Wood therefore contracted to purchase four thousand stands of arms from England and another four thousand muskets from the Globe Mills in Pennsylvania. The latter source made just 925 arms over the next five years and then went bankrupt.⁶⁶

Cromwell's account matches this, in part, but then describes how after McCormick went into bankruptcy, his foreman James Haslett finished another 50 arms, bringing the total up to 975. Then Cromwell describes how John Miles, Sr., completed McCormick's 4,000 musket

⁶³ Bellesiles, 242.

⁶⁴ Bellesiles, 236.

⁶⁵ Giles Cromwell, *The Virginia Manufactory of Arms* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1975), 2.

⁶⁶ Bellesiles, 236.

contract, and made 250 pairs of pistols for Virginia as well. For some odd reason, Bellesiles missed this important detail, giving a much darker picture of American gunmaking capabilities than Cromwell described.

Cromwell also reports that George Wheeler of Culpeper County made at least 1,000 muskets for Virginia, and James Haslett completed another contract for 600 muskets.⁶⁷ In addition, Virginia also contracted with a number of gunsmiths to make 2,145 rifles in the years 1809-19—and Cromwell makes the point that these contracts were “generally limited...to residents of Virginia....”⁶⁸ (Cromwell’s Appendix B.8 lists the twenty Virginia contract rifle makers, and the number of guns actually completed and delivered.)⁶⁹

Bellesiles, by leaving out these other contracts for muskets and rifles, misleads the reader into thinking that gun makers were so scarce that when Virginia's one private American contractor went bankrupt, Virginia was left in the lurch, and were forced to start a state gun factory for this reason: “It was at this point that the Virginia government agreed with a plan that John Clarke had been promoting for several years to build an armory in Virginia to make guns for state use.”⁷⁰

Cromwell discuss Clarke's involvement, and at *no point* does Cromwell suggest that the armory was Clarke's idea; quite the opposite. The sequence as described by Cromwell was that the Virginia government came up with the idea. After discussing the “mammoth task” and “special and selected skills” that would be required, Cromwell says: “By whatever methods employed, however, the Executive ultimately chose John Clarke of Powhatan County.” There is *no* indication in Cromwell that Clarke's involvement predates the decision of Virginia to go into the gunmaking business.⁷¹ Maybe there is some evidence out there

⁶⁷ Cromwell, 6-9. James Whisker, *The Gunsmith's Trade* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 193-4, reports that Peter Brong, Abraham Henry, and Henry DeHuff, Jr. also submitted an unsuccessful bid on the contract with the state of Virginia for pistols and long guns. *The Gunsmith's Trade* is another source that Bellesiles relies upon when convenient.

⁶⁸ Cromwell, 85-87.

⁶⁹ Cromwell, 174.

⁷⁰ Bellesiles, 236.

⁷¹ Cromwell, 11-14.

somewhere, but Bellesiles doesn't cite it, and what Bellesiles does cite—Cromwell—indicates just the opposite.

Bellesiles describes where Clarke purchased tools for the Manufactory thusly, as part of his claim about a scarcity of gun manufacturing in America: “In creating the Virginia Manufactory of Arms, Clarke found it necessary to buy all his tools in England.”⁷² Cromwell agrees that Clarke bought all his tools in England, but not the reason that Bellesiles implies—that there was not much of a gun industry in America. “Clarke favored purchasing such implements as vises, anvils, bellows, and files from Europe, where he believed better terms could be arranged. He felt that there were no tool manufacturers large enough in the United States to meet the requirements of the armory.”⁷³

The armory was a large-scale gun manufacturing operation, much like the federal government's arsenals at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, and Springfield, Massachusetts, and the number of tools required was quite large. But the inability of American toolmakers to produce enough gun making tools is not an indication that there was not a large American gun making industry—many of whom doubtless also purchased their tools from England. It is only an indication that the tools for making guns were not made in America in sufficient quantity.

Bellesiles claims that Clarke found that there were few gunsmiths in Virginia: “More frustrating, he quickly discovered that there were only a few gunsmiths in Virginia and they all did exclusively repair work.”⁷⁴ Cromwell does mention that Virginia was short of “skilled artificers,” but then goes on to explain the problems that Clarke was having, and in terms that do not fit Bellesiles's characterization very well:

The various gunsmiths in the different sections of the state were restricted primarily to limited repair work and in some instances to rifle making itself, and while some of these rifle makers would eventually seek employment in the armory, in most instances they were financially better off remaining in their own independent shops.

⁷² Bellesiles, 236.

⁷³ Cromwell, 31.

⁷⁴ Bellesiles, 236.

Consequently, Clarke defended his travels by saying that had he remained in Richmond and advertised for gunsmiths most probably he would have acquired the most indifferent workmen who were unable to find employment at other works.⁷⁵

So the problem was not that Virginia lacked gunsmiths, but that the terms that Clarke was prepared to offer would not attract the better Virginia gun makers, who were presumably making a decent income from their own shops. Somehow, this doesn't sound like a scarcity of gunsmiths, nor a shortage of demand for their products. Bellesiles must have read over these pages in *Cromwell* too quickly.

Bellesiles continues his misreading of *Cromwell* that there were few gunsmiths in Virginia, and not many more in the rest of America, because Americans didn't make guns: "Clarke ended up hiring sixty-eight workers, all of them from outside Virginia and a dozen brought over from Ireland."⁷⁶

The reason that *Cromwell* gives for hiring outside of Virginia is very different from Bellesiles's claims about a scarcity of gunsmiths in Virginia. "Clarke had found during his travels that the lowest wages were paid in Massachusetts and Rhode Island; so he concentrated on hiring people in those areas."⁷⁷ Hartzler quotes a letter in full from Clarke that confirms that he "found the wages of such men lower in Massachusetts and Rhode Island than in any other of the States. I therefore engaged in those states all the workmen of the desired description I could find, and on my return back again to the works I first visited [in Philadelphia], the workmen were induced to fall in their prices...."⁷⁸

Concerning those "dozen brought over from Ireland," *Cromwell's* account is very clear, and in complete contradiction to Bellesiles's representation of it. According to *Cromwell*, "He was also successful in hiring artificers from Pennsylvania, where they had previously been employed by Haslett, and of the nineteen workmen who came to Richmond from this

⁷⁵ *Cromwell*, 37.

⁷⁶ Bellesiles, 236.

⁷⁷ *Cromwell*, 37.

⁷⁸ Hartzler, 164.

source, the majority were originally natives of Ireland.”⁷⁹ Clarke’s letter reproduced in Hartzler also is clear on this: of the gunsmiths that Clarke hired in Philadelphia, the “greater number of these men are natives of Ireland” but they were not “brought over” from Ireland to work in the Virginia Gun Manufactory.⁸⁰

This is an important point. Bellesiles’s claim was that Cromwell said gunsmiths were so scarce in America that Clarke had to bring over a “dozen” from Ireland to work at the Virginia Manufactory of Arms. This is simply not so, and Cromwell does not make any such claim; the gunsmiths were already at work in Pennsylvania when Clarke hired them.

Bellesiles continues: “For the rest of its brief history, this need to find skilled gunsmiths prevented the armory from ever producing many arms. Virginia’s was the only state armory in antebellum America, averaging 2,130 muskets per year, or twenty-six guns per worker.”⁸¹ What Bellesiles doesn’t tell his reader, however, is that the Manufactory made a lot more than muskets—and had he read beyond the fifty-five pages that he cited (or had he just flipped through the rest of the book, looking at the pictures and chapter titles), he would know that. Significantly, the reason Cromwell gives why Virginia shut down its Manufactory in 1821 doesn’t match Bellesiles’s claims about a factory that had problems “producing many arms”; it almost directly contradicts it. What Cromwell describes as an important factor was that,

By 1821 the armory had produced enough small arms to equip most of the state’s militia, for from the beginning of operations in 1802 until its closing in 1821, the Virginia Manufactory of Arms had produced approximately 58,428 muskets and bayonets, 2,093 rifles, 10,309 swords, and 4,252 pistols for a total of 75,082 small arms.... The annual federal quota of new firearms began arriving regularly in the state by 1820. Thus the armory was slowly outgrowing its reason for existence.⁸²

Concerning the shortage of gunsmiths impairing their operations, it is worthwhile to examine Cromwell’s Appendix D. It takes up fourteen pages listing gunsmiths who worked

⁷⁹ Cromwell, 37.

⁸⁰ Hartzler, 164.

⁸¹ Bellesiles, 236.

⁸² Cromwell, 150.

at the Manufactory during its less than twenty year period of operation. This does not sound like a serious shortage of gunsmiths!

Bellesiles's claims about the reliance of American gun makers on imported gunlocks also collapses. A "gunlock" is the trigger lockwork mechanism. Bellesiles emphasizes that gunlocks were very complex to make, and claims, "No one in America could make the key part of the gun, its lock, until the Revolutionary era...."⁸³ Later he expands on that claim, asserting that American gunmakers were unable to make gunlocks before the Revolution.⁸⁴ He also claims that were few made in America until Samuel Colt freed American makers "from the long-term dependence of all American gunmakers on English locks" in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁸⁵

A detailed refutation of this claim for the Colonial and Revolutionary period is beyond the scope of this paper. However, all the muskets made at the Manufactory, from the very beginning, used lock plates stamped with its name, and by the Manufactory. The spare parts collection shown in an inventory after it closed reveals that lock plates and sears (both fundamental parts of a gunlock) were made at the Manufactory.⁸⁶ It does not appear that the Manufactory imported gunlocks at all. An examination of the list of suppliers to the Manufactory for the years 1798-1809 reveals no gunlock suppliers. The only complete subassembly of guns listed among the suppliers are gunstocks.⁸⁷

Another example of Bellesiles's curious misreading of sources concerns the 1756 emergency call-up of the Virginia militia:

Colonel Washington reported on the militia to Governor Dinwiddie: "Many of them [are] unarmed, and *all* without ammunition or provision." In one company of more than seventy men, he reported, only twenty-five had any sort of firearms. Washington found such militia "incapacitated to defend themselves, much less to annoy the enemy."⁸⁸

⁸³ Bellesiles, 106.

⁸⁴ Bellesiles, 184.

⁸⁵ Bellesiles, 380.

⁸⁶ Cromwell, 44-46, 64-65.

⁸⁷ Cromwell, 177-84.

⁸⁸ Bellesiles, 159.

But when you examine what Washington *actually* wrote in that letter, you find that Bellesiles has quoted Washington out of context. Bellesiles leads the reader to believe that Washington was complaining that this was the *general* state of the militia. Washington was clearly referring to only *some* militia units:

I think myself under the necessity of informing your Honor, of the odd behaviour of the few Militia that were marched hither from Fairfax, Culpeper, and Prince William counties. Many of them unarmed, and *all* without ammunition or provision. Those of Culpeper behaved particularly ill: Out of the hundred that were draughted, seventy-odd arrived here; of which only twenty-five were tolerably armed.

Washington considered the militia arriving inadequately armed to be “odd behaviour,” and worth mentioning. This suggests that other militia units *were* adequately armed, and brought ammunition. Washington sought to have the unarmed militiamen punished, which suggests that their behavior—arriving inadequately armed, without ammunition--was exceptional, not typical.⁸⁹ And yet Bellesiles portrays this unusual situation among a “few” of Washington’s militia units as normal behavior for the militia that Washington commanded.

This paper provides only a few such glaring examples. After roughly nine months of research, I have found so many such examples that I have not even bothered to examine logical flaws in Bellesiles’s reasoning, except when such reasoning was built heavily on Bellesiles’s misreading of a source. I have not worried much about Bellesiles’s thesis-directed readings of ambiguous sources. Nor is my research exhaustive; most of the examples I have found were because the source was readily available (either online, or at the local university library), or because I had previously read the source that Bellesiles misread. A more comprehensive examination of Bellesiles’s misreading of sources that I am currently writing is approaching 100,000 words, and I have barely scratched the surface of *Arming America*.

As the reader by now should have figured out, I am not impressed with the quality of Professor Bellesiles’s scholarship. Yet the reviews in the popular press, often by distinguished

⁸⁹ George Washington to Robert Dinwiddie, June 27, 1757, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931-44), 2:78-79.

American history professors, have been overwhelmingly positive. It would appear that many of America's most prominent historians assume that if Professor Bellesiles makes an astonishing factual claim, well, he must have looked it up, because *Arming America* is full of endnotes and an impressive sea of citations.

Yet it is apparent that there are dozens of statements of fact in *Arming America* that do not stand up to even the most cursory examination. Perhaps, as has been suggested, Bellesiles's conclusions are correct, even though many of his "facts" are grossly and clearly wrong. At a minimum, those who are partial to citing *Arming America* as a source would be well-advised to check his citations before using any of his "facts."

It should also not be a surprise to anyone who reads *Arming America* that there are clear-cut public policy conclusions that can be drawn from it. As Stewart Udall says on the back dust jacket of the book, "Thinking people who deplore Americans' addiction to gun violence have been waiting a long time for this information." It would be a curious matter indeed for any historian to devote years of life to the study of a historical problem, and hold no opinions about its relevance to today's questions. Ideally, however, the research should direct the opinions, not the other way around.